Cross Platform

Sound in other media. This month: Jason Weiss meets surfer, lifeguard and longtime improvising performance painter Norton Wisdom

Left: Improv artist Norton Wisdom's painting *Trumpet Crowd*. Right: Live brushwork with avant jazz group Banyan

Audiences seldom know what to expect: alongside the instruments on stage stands a large backlit opaque screen, ringed by paint cans, pots, brushes, squeegees and rags. At once, a man with dark blond curls wearing a white jumpsuit bounds out to take up his tools, listens to the first sounds emerge, and begins to paint. Thick wavy lines gather as a patch of sea, to spring up like a jet of wild hair on a bare-bosomed goddess and, as the pulse of the music quickens, she is embracing a man, both astride a horse, beneath a small winged cupid who hovers with his arrow. The painter prowls around, pulling images from inside his images – snakes, dragons, angels, gods, monkeys and alligators – until the music flies along without him and he stops to reconsider. Applying his hands directly to the surface, he erases the picture to prepare a new ground, or with his squeegees parts the waves of paint, wiping the screen clean. "The screen is translucent, usually fibreglass," performance painter Norton Wisdom explains. "If fibreglass is unavailable, I use windows and glass doors, whatever is on hand. The idea is to create a stained glass window effect. The paint is water based, operative word is cheap and safe and can be cleaned up without evidence that there was ever a painter on stage. Since art supplies on tour in the backwaters of places like Minnesota and North Dakota are questionable at best, I have learned to be able to go into a gas station and a drugstore and come out with materials to do a gig."

Painting and music, of course, share a common impulse, as close as the eye and the ear: both organise elements of line, colour, rhythm. But only in the mid-20th century did the disciplines begin to really overlap, due to the rise of abstraction in one and improvisation in the other. The action painters (Pollock, Kline, De Kooning) who frequented New York jazz clubs drew on the same uncompromising spontaneity as Thelonious Monk in executing their own work. In France, Yves Klein unified the performance of both with models producing his monochrome body-print paintings while an orchestra played his one chord *Monotone Symphony*. Elsewhere, Fluxus artist Nam June Paik was abandoning early efforts as a composer to incorporate music performance as a foundation in his video installations. When musician and artist were the same person, the roles usually alternated. Painter Larry Rivers began as a jazz saxophonist, but only performed occasionally after becoming an art star. For 40 years, Michael Snow has carried on two mostly parallel careers as improvising pianist and visual artist. But the act of painting as a performance while musicians improvise in front of an audience is far less common. At 57, Wisdom has remained true to the nature of his practice over the years. "The first time I painted with live music was in 1964," he says, "at my high school, when The Doors were playing at our junior dance. I was going to Chinouards Art School at night then and was very much into the Beat scene, which was all about freedom from old academic ideas."

A native of Los Angeles and lifelong surfer, before finishing art school he secured an ideal civil service job: as a lifeguard on the beaches of Malibu, retiring just a year ago (he was among the real-life inspirations for *Baywatch*). During that time, he developed an obsessive abstract format in his studio painting that has proved fruitful to this day: four trapezoids framing a door-like centre provided a sculptural visual support for endless possibilities of expression. But on a trip to Berlin in 1980 he took that obsession outside when he decided, in protest, to paint his trapezoids on a section of the Berlin Wall; he was detained and then deported. Looking to maintain that sense of risk in his art, he soon joined keyboard/synthesizer player Zam Johnson and saxophonist Eddie 'Snakepit' Edwards to do live painting performances as the group Panic in punk clubs and jazz bars around LA.

It was at one such gig, at a biker bar in Venice, that guitarist and current Wilco member Nels Cline first saw Wisdom, leading to many collaborations. This line of practice before an audience evolved differently from his studio work, in what might be termed a figurative expressionism, as he built up his own iconography with a fluid capacity for constant metamorphoses. Wisdom and Cline first performed together in the early 1990s; later, when Cline was directing the New Music Mondays series at the Alligator Lounge in Santa Monica during the mid-1990s, Wisdom got to paint with various musicians, including Cline's trio. Later, Cline brought him to paint with Banyan, the jazz rock group led by drummer Stephen Perkins (Jane's Addiction) that also includes Minuteman Mike Watt and trumpeter Willie Waldman. Wisdom became their frequent collaborator, performing all over the United States.

Maybe his decades as a lifeguard prepared him, but the fact remains that Wisdom is fearless, and his painting in both modes (live and studio) wins admirers at every turn – galleries and museums have taken interest in him – though he resists the courtship dance of the art market. Among his more unusual collaborators over the years are The Los Angeles Philharmonic, Butoh dancers in Japan, and The National Bamboo Orchestra in a limestone grotto in Bali, in addition to working with varied musicians as Charles Owens, Badal Roy, Rob Wasserman, Daniel Lanois, Ivan Neville, George Clinton, Beck, Jaguares and Lili Haydn.

Though Wisdom somehow thrives in nearly every musical setting, Cline prefers to take matters further, to work one on one in a way that is fully collaborative. They formed a duo, Stained Radiance, as a more unified project, which continues to perform around LA. "What he does," says Cline, "is simultaneously on his own track and in the moment, and it all works together." Curiously, for a long time these paintings shared an essential quality of improvised music, in that they were ephemeral; they existed only for that evening and he would wash them down after the gig. A few years ago, he started photographing them to document the work; he has even been known to rework them for gallery shows.

Regarding their performances as a duo, Cline has occasionally tried to direct him in tone or mood, but mostly he tends to work off what emerges in the painting. Wisdom for his part appreciates Cline's suppleness and adaptability as especially suited to the overall dynamic of such work. "The nature of the music directs the outcome of my painting," he concludes. "I stay out of the way and let the music paint my pictures, and I am very fortunate to work with this level of musicians. So once the event starts, it has a life of its own." □ *Norton Wisdom performs weekly in LA with ambient surf group Magic Box, and is appearing with Banyan at the Monterey Jazz Festival in September. More information and images at www.nortonwisdom.com*

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